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Alternative Farm Enterprises – Agritourism Success Stories

Greenhouse Bedding Plants, Welded Sculptures, Wetland Restoration, Hunting and Beef Cattle

Interview with Jeff and Lisa Weber, 11577 157th Avenue,
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What is the history of your farm and farming experience?

We live in Chippewa County, Wisconsin, with our children, April, Adam, and Andy. We purchased our 200-acre dairy/woodland farm in 1979 and rented another 100 acres for corn and small grain production. We milked 35-45 cows and sold Grade A milk until 1996, when I had spinal surgery after a farm accident. We replaced the dairy herd with 35 beef cattle, while I pursued my hobby of welding art, and Lisa started to work off the farm to offset the loss of income from the dairy cows and to provide health insurance benefits.

Describe the alternative enterprises in which you are presently engaged.

I have three different enterprises other than the beef cows. (1) I have long enjoyed welding as a hobby. I would take old machinery parts and rearrange them into horse heads, sheep, cows, dinosaurs, birds, flowers, etc. After my surgery, I began to focus on welding art as a source of income. After an article appeared in the local paper in April 2001, I received calls for two pieces I had made and shipped the product to very happy customers. (2) In 2000, I began operating a greenhouse to produce bedding plants—annuals, vegetables, and perennials. (3) I am also restoring 40 acres of wetlands, using the Wetlands Reserve Program, with plans to open it to hunting for the disabled.

What made you decide to go into the present alternative enterprises?

After my surgery, AgrAbility of Wisconsin worked with me to care for my dairy herd. This program, an Easter Seals and University of Wisconsin Extension partnership program, assists injured farmers. I took job evaluation tests and found out that I was best suited for what I was doing: Working outdoors and being my own manager. I enjoyed growing plants and came up with the idea of purchasing a greenhouse. There are several greenhouses in our area.

How did you make the transition?

My welding art has not been progressing as fast as I would like, because I ran out of parts. Most of my art was based on hay rake wheels and other used farm equipment. So, I transitioned into using new metal, purchased a circular framer, and made the same art but with new metal. In my earlier years, I had gone to a technical school and learned a little about welding. The arc welder and wire feed welding with argon gas produce very fine welded work. I even autograph each piece. Welding has mostly been a self-taught process.

I purchased a greenhouse and its entire fixtures, stocks, and supplies for a very good price in 1999. I found out I lacked a lot of knowledge, so AgrAbility of Wisconsin paid for my Garden Masters schooling, which was much better than purchasing automated equipment to keep me in dairy.

In the spring of 2000, I put in my bedding plants and began the greenhouse enterprise. I had everything I needed, so no additional purchases were necessary. When it came time to sell, I ran ads in the paper and put up signs.

What is your decisionmaking process

I don't have a formal decisionmaking process. I do only what I have money for because I will not mortgage my farm. I have found that starting small and building is the best way. You learn from your customers, neighbors, and friends. I know I want to continue to grow my horticulture and welding art businesses. I am going to develop the wetlands preserve. As time permits, I will promote these enterprises after I have set aside family time. I need to move forward slowly because I don't know what the next day brings as a result of my spinal surgery.

How do you go about business planning and goal setting?

My business plan is informal and evolving. For example, people drove past my place to buy bedding plants and other horticultural crops at greenhouses on both sides of me. I just said, 'I can get some of that business,' so I changed my signage to attract more people.

My first year was very successful because I had paid for my first greenhouse, so I purchased a second one in 2000. I also planted pumpkins and sold them to a major greenhouse marketer about 20 miles from me. In 2001, I needed backup for bedding plants if my sales exceeded my supply. I found this source and purchased plants as I needed them. I keep my costs to a minimum with no hired labor and use basic production systems. I did the welding art as a hobby, and now, I am finding out people are waiting for this type of product. I will search out the markets and determine the best place to market my art. I don't have a lot of time for travel, as my beef cows take daily care.

How did you acquire information.

I started by going to a formal class of Garden Masters given by the Extension Service. In fact, I

ended up teaching a couple of classes. I gained a tremendous amount of knowledge from all of the participants. This course really helped build up my confidence in greenhouse operation. I read many magazines and talked to a friend with greenhouses to develop a network. I went to seminars, distributors' meetings, and buying shows, seeking information and a network. I would go and ask them some very detailed management questions. They were very generous with their information. This is what rural America is all about—helping each other. I became a close friend with one of the local greenhouse owners, who is a mentor to me. I gave him straw because he was so generous with his information. Now, we partner in starting and raising plants. I will raise one kind and he another, and we purchase from each other.

How did you market your products?

This is the most difficult area to carry out. I placed ads in papers and found them essentially useless. Road signs and word of mouth are the best. I deliver personal service and relationships. Many of my customers are elderly, so I go the extra mile to help them. I will bring plants out to the car for them to make their choices, and I make special walkways for them. I am going to expand my plant variety and enlarge the price signs so the seniors can readily read them. One greenhouse is handicap accessible. People like to bargain and so do I, so I give quantity discounts, bargain for prices, and give away free plants to kids. If I have extra or slow-moving varieties, I give them to adults. I place the sun-loving plants in one area and shade-loving plants in another area of the greenhouse. Customers have really commented on this helpful feature. I have purchased colorful posters of the bedding plants I sell so the customers can see how they look when grown. This has helped sell many plants in 2001. I sell quality products. Last week, I would not sell some plants because they had white flies on them. My goal is to make people feel good, build my return customer base, make money, and sell my plants.

How do you price your products?

I visit neighboring greenhouses and set my price at or a little below theirs. I also gave away free plants, which draws a number of visitors.

What went wrong? How did you correct the situation?

I did not check out all the requirements for signage. I found out that I needed state and county approval. It was time consuming to obtain approval from landowners to put up signs on their property. Also, the state and county required fees, and I had to lease the space on the privately owned land. Now, I have agreements in place with the appropriate governments and landowners for 2002 and beyond.

I was not prepared for all the questions my customers would ask me about flowers and vegetables. Some of them have no idea as what to buy. I have done more reading and learned from those who are knowledgeable gardeners. I search out answers to questions I cannot answer.

What went right? How did you build on your success?

Several things went right for me. The road signs worked great to pull the people off the road and shop at my greenhouses. My personal service, and one-on-one discussions, and pricing have grown my business through word of mouth. I price according to what people will bargain for, and I give quantity discounts and free plants.

I work with other greenhouse operators to exchange information and products. For example, I market all my pumpkins to a large greenhouse operator. Last year, he saw my pumpkins and paid me more than we had agreed upon. Now, I grow his varieties, and we are both happier. I help people plan their perennial and annual gardens—one time I drew out the customer's garden in the gravel and placed the perennial plants in the appropriate locations. She was very appreciative. I started small and my business is growing with me in control. I now have ten tomato varieties, six peppers, two cucumbers, two squash, a dozen herbs, and about 75 perennials.

My welding art is just waiting for my attention to promote the business.

What would you have done differently?

I would have planned further ahead in developing the signage. My prices and plant labels need to be in front of the customer. Each plant needs a label and a price. Everything about the plants and prices needs to be more visible. I have found that end-of-season shoppers get upset when all the plants are not top quality. I need to impress upon my customers that you need to shop early to get the best quality.

Where do you plan to go from here?

I am going to expand my welding art during the winter by marketing more vigorously. I am going to make one-of-a-kind decorative plant holders to accommodate the plants I sell. I am going to use one greenhouse for perennials and one for annual flowers, and I will construct a small plastic hoop house for the vegetable bedding plants. I have set aside one-third of my shop for starting annuals and perennials. I am going to expand outside the greenhouse by growing perennials, shrubs, and trees by buying small bare-root plants for about \$1.60, pot the plants, and then 2 years later sell them for \$7-15.00. I am also increasing my pumpkins to 2,000 plants. I want to reduce my cattle numbers and switch over to marketing grass-fed beef, as whole-cow hamburger, to my customers. The plant holders and grass-fed beef will attract a new group of consumers.

I am going to investigate the possibility of turning the top of the barn into an antique consignment store. This would lengthen my business season and open up other opportunities. I am going to expand my hot water heating system that now heats my house, shop, and greenhouses to the top of the barn. I burn wood from all sources. (I call it recycle wood that other people throw away.) I am going to make the wetlands handicap accessible by building a couple of platforms with ready access for waterfowl hunting.

What would be the most important advice you would give other farmers considering an alternative enterprise?

1. Keep your place clean and neat.

2. Make sure your premises are safe.
3. Research every step of production, marketing, signage, etc.
4. Make sure your new enterprise is what you want to do.
5. If you sell to people, you have to like working with people, the good and the not so good.
6. You have to be willing to be open seven days a week for 12 hours a day during the selling season.

How did you handle the liability concern?

I am a small producer and thus, my farm insurance is adequate. I have a Farm Insurance Liability Plan.

What do you dislike the most and like the most?

It is the people. I like sharing information, helping others, making deals with people, learning from others, and working with people of all ages. I dislike people who do not understand the business and then make derogatory statements because they are not informed.

Would you start this alternative enterprise business today after learning what is involved?

Yes, but I would have started sooner. I would have invested some of my money into the greenhouses rather than farm equipment. It would have been a wiser use of my money.

What groups/organizations/activities have you joined or become involved in because of the alternative enterprises?

I joined the Master Gardeners Program. We meet several times a year in a workshop format to learn and share about greenhouse production and gardening.

What conservation and education activities do you have?

I have been involved in conservation and resource restoration for years. I have built ponds over the years with assistance from Fish and Wildlife Services, the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, and the Natural Resources Conservation Service. I am now working with NRCS and DNR to restore 40 acres of wetlands for hunting for neighbors, friends, and myself. I also have a barnyard diversion, grass waterways, and contour strips on the land. My education effort is sharing knowledge with my customers on a one-on-one basis. I am planning to work with children in the area of art as others are working with gardening.

What do your customers like the most about your product?

My customers like it when they know I planted the seeds and I grew the plants, and now I am selling the plants. Some people cannot believe I do all of it. My customers also like my special assistance such as landscape advice and variety selection. They also like my unique welded art.

Do you want additional information? For more success stories and other information, see the website:

<http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/technical/RESS/>

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